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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 9102
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 1011
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT 0813
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4282
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 8053
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 8239
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 6459
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 3443
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 7426
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RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 000051

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [SCUL](#) [PGOV](#) [IN](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: LIMP GOI RESPONSE TO SADDAM EXECUTION DICTATED BY
MUSLIM ROLE IN DOMESTIC POLITICS

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Classified By: Political Counselor Ted Osius for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The GOI issued a tepid if not unhelpful response to the December 30 execution of Saddam Hussein. This was dictated by Congress concerns regarding the sensibilities of India's Muslims. Congress faces a crucial election in Uttar Pradesh (UP) later this year and the state's Muslims could play a deciding role in determining the outcome. Congress has determined that it must reconstruct its old coalition of religious minorities and Dalits to regain power in UP, a requisite for maintaining its hold on power in New Delhi over the long term. With these sensitivities in mind, the UPA government is determined not to do or say anything that will anger or alienate Muslim opinion (or upset the US too much). To the contrary, the UPA has unveiled a campaign of economic incentives and civil rights measures aimed at attracting Muslim voters back into its camp. For the time being, Congress sensitivity seems to be misplaced, as protests around the country have been politically manipulated and reveal no great or lasting depth of feeling. It appears that the execution issue will have little long-term resonance, as Muslims move on to other issues that have more relevance. End Summary.

The GOI Responds

12. (U) India's Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee issued an official GOI statement following the December 30 execution of Saddam Hussein:

We had already expressed the hope that the execution would not be carried out. We are disappointed that it has been. We hope that this unfortunate event will not affect the process of reconciliation, restoration of peace and normalcy in Iraq.

Muted Press Criticism

13. (SBU) Most Indian editorials mildly condemned the execution, which was universally depicted as an American act, rather than that of a sovereign Iraqi government. Most papers, both English and vernacular described the government in Baghdad as a "puppet" or "dummy" government. The most damning language, such as that contained in an Op-ed in the Calcutta-based "Telegraph," condemned the execution as "a latter-day version of the brutal, market-place beheadings of the Middle Ages." The paper went on to emphasize that "by hanging Saddam Hussein, the US, the world's oldest democracy, has shown that it cannot tolerate dissent." Other papers took a more reasoned viewpoint; a Hindi newspaper expressed fear that the execution presaged an impending US pullout from Iraq that would leave India exposed to growing terrorism. Others expressed regret that "upcoming generations of the Arab world will be filled with hatred for the West and its result will be far reaching."

North India Largely Quiet

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14. (C) North India has remained quiet since the execution, with a few minor demonstrations (under 300 persons) staged in Delhi. On January 1 (Bakri Eid) a group of Amcits from Cornell University were accosted by angry Muslims during a tour of Fathehpur Sikri (some 40 kilometers from Agra). Although several vehicles were damaged, police successfully escorted the group out of danger. Police told the group that it had strayed into a Muslim neighborhood "seething with anger" over the execution. Our contacts tell us to expect more serious demonstrations at the conclusion of jumma prayers at mosques in Uttar Pradesh (UP) on Friday. We are told that the ruling Samajwadi Party (SP), which relies heavily on Muslim support, will try to get cooperative maulvis to sponsor anti-American demonstrations.

South India More Restive

15. (C) Congen Chennai reports that a combination of Communist and Islamic groups staged large anti-US protests in several locations in the days following the execution and that local media condemned the act and supported the protests. In Communist-ruled Kerala, political parties from across the spectrum supported ruling party protests and the Legislative Assembly unanimously condemned the execution. An impromptu general strike started at 1500 on December 31 and shut down the state for the rest of the day. In Andhra Pradesh, Communist and Islamic groups held rallies and burned effigies of President Bush in the state capital of Hyderabad. Karnataka was largely quiet, with no protests other than on the editorial pages. In Tamil Nadu, the regional parties held joint protests with the Communists and Muslim parties. Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi decried the execution and opposition leader J. Jayalalitha called on all nations to combat US "imperialistic, fascist plans designed to subjugate the rest of the world."

Scattered Protests in West India

¶6. (C) Congen Mumbai reports that protests in Western India were "small, isolated and peaceful," organized primarily by Muslim groups and sympathetic political parties. As in Delhi, the processions did not involve more than a few hundred participants. Political commentators dismissed protests by the region's politicians as "political grandstanding" in preparation for Mumbai's February 1 municipal elections. The most notable critic was Maharashtra strongman politician and National Congress Party (NCP) President Sharad Pawar, who described Hussein as a "friend of India," who had always stood with New Delhi. Pawar, a member of the UPA government, criticized the GOI reaction, saying it should have been swifter and harsher. In Gujarat, press reports indicate that up to 45,000 Muslims stayed away from ongoing Eid festivities to protest the execution, while 10,000 attended a protest prayer meeting in Junagadh. Congen Mumbai believes these numbers to be inflated.

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Communists Dictate Response in East India

¶7. (C) The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and smaller Communist groups cast a long shadow in West Bengal and the East India region. They kept the protests muted and focused on US "hegemony" in Iraq, rather than giving them an Islamic cast. Although police increased their presence at Congen Calcutta and at the American Center, protests were "minimal" and peaceful. The Left Front (LF) coalition promised to stage a large demonstration in Calcutta on January 2, but it never materialized. Most West Bengal media took a critical stance, calling the trial and execution "illegitimate" and dismissing the process as a "kangaroo court." They predicted that the slipshod trial and execution would further undermine US efforts to achieve stability in Iraq.

Grassroots Admiration in Muslim Villages

¶8. (U) Several press reports documented cases in which rural Muslims expressed admiration for Saddam Hussein. A village in Bihar reportedly has 25 children named "Saddam Hussein," with up to 100 others in neighboring hamlets. One resident told reporters that "we have named our children Saddam because he was a brave man. He was the protector of Muslims and was an honorable person." Another stated that "I am proud of myself and my villagers are also proud that there are many Saddams in this village. No hero has been born as great as Saddam." Another press report from Gujarat quoted two Muslim women who pledged to name their children "Saddam" if they were male.

Comment - Vote Bank Unease from the GOI

¶9. (C) The GOI's tepid response was clearly dictated by domestic political considerations. Congress once achieved an unassailable position in Indian politics by depicting itself as the party determined to protect Indian religious minorities (Muslims, Christians) and Dalits (formerly "untouchables"). It lost its stranglehold on national politics when the Muslims drifted away. Congress ideologues are well-aware that the party needs to revive this winning formula. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the crucial Hindi heartland state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). In UP, the Muslims have thrown their support to the ruling Samajwadi Party, and Congress must wean them away to regain its former dominant position. UP Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav has been called "Mullah Mulayam" for his strong support of the Muslim community and his stance against Hindutva groups such as the RSS. To ensure Muslim support, Mulayam has taken a strong anti-US stance on issues such as Iraq. UP is going to the polls early this year and if the election is close, the

Muslims could play a critical role in determining the next government in Lucknow and Delhi. Mulayam is well-aware of the importance of his Muslim "vote bank" and is expected to whip up Muslim emotions around the Saddam execution to

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demonstrate his support for "Muslim" causes. Unwilling to endanger the US/India relationship by encouraging harsh Islamist rhetoric, Congress has tried to take the high road, by depicting Indian Muslims as victims of persecution and discrimination and unveiling a series of economic uplift and civil rights programs aimed at bettering their lot and winning their loyalty. In the eyes of the GOI, Iraq is a sensitive domestic Muslim issue and it remains determined to take a soft line and do nothing that will alienate or anger the crucial Islamic constituency. At the same time, the GOI's formal statements also seek to avoid raising the ire of its Washington patrons.

110. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:
(<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi/>)
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